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V CORPS TROOPS IN BALAD SAY IRAQIS THANKFUL TO COALITION FOR OPPORTUNITY TO VOTE

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE PALIWODA, Iraq -- Officials with Task Force

Danger, led by V Corps' 1st Infantry Division, say the Iraqis who voted here in Balad January 30 thanked coalition forces for helping them to cast their ballots.

"You could see the pride and joy Iraqis got out of voting ... as they approached American Soldiers on the street to say, 'Thank you for providing us this opportunity,'" said Maj. Larry Reeves, operations officer for the 1st Battalion, 77th Armor of the corps' 1st Infantry Division.

The people of Balad participated in their first democratic election with the help of the Iraqi army and Iraqi security forces, with Task Force Danger providing additional support if needed.

Despite the dangers and threats of terrorists and insurgent activity, more than 30,000 Balad, Yethrib and Ishaki voters hit the polls.

"The bravery shown not only by Iraqi forces, but also the residents of Balad, assured the elections were a success," Reeves said. "We had 23 incidents of terrorist activity

in our area and people still came out to vote. The people were ecstatic -- they were lined up on the streets just waiting to vote."

More than 60 percent of registered voters came out to exercise their rights, ignoring reports of indirect fire and suicide bombings at polling sites throughout Iraq, Reeves said.

"Everyone here was excited. No one was disappointed with the turnout, and there were no attacks on our sites and no one was killed," said 1st Lt. Martin Rafter.

Making sure the elections received all the support necessary to be a success required a lot of coordination, the lieutenant said.

"The Joint Coordination Center played a critical role in the election," said Rafter. "It served as a hub for the mayor of Balad and liaisons from the Iraqi army, police, fire department, newspapers, radio, hospital, water, and electricity. It helped them to respond and get the latest information from the polling sites."

The JCC helped to secure the elections; to distribute and collect ballots, and to send the ballots to Tikrit, he added.

"They were also able to track all the polling sites as well as send response teams if necessary. It made working with the elections much easier for everyone involved," Rafter said.

Once a citizen voted, he dipped his finger in ink to show that he had cast his ballot. This kept them from voting more than once.

"The black finger was more of a badge of honor than a safeguard," Reeves said.

"Those that voted would walk around showing the finger to other Iraqis, because it was something they were very proud of. Children and grandchildren will talk about this day for years to come."

"This was one of the most memorable days since we've been here. To see the people of Balad, Yethrib and Ishaki and Iraqi forces working together for a common goal was great."

